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AUTHOR Zoghby, Mary D.
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ABSTRACT

Anne Tyler's rare talent for combining comedy and pathos enables her to create characters whose pain is felt by the reader or student even as that same reader is led into laughter by the ludicrous situations in which Tyler places these characters. In her last three novels, "Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant," "The Accidental Tourist," and "Breathing Lessons," this ability to write comedy, indeed to structure farcical situations, without severely distancing her characters from the reader contributes significantly to both the critical and the popular success of her works. In all three novels the protagonists, who suffer varying degrees of isolation and loneliness, do not give up the search for family solidarity though for them the pain is not mitigated by laughter as it is for the reader. An examination of scenes from all three novels show how, with her humor, Tyler entertains readers and endears her characters to them. She makes the characters and their everyday experiences memorable, and perhaps less pitiable than they would otherwise be, so that it is easier to see them as having behavior patterns similar to the reader's. Tyler's sympathetic portrayals ensure that the readers laugh not at the characters, but at their unexpected remarks and actions. Amid the incongruities, the slapstick, the clever strategies in the action of these novels, Tyler tells a story of men and women whose suffering moves the reader to experience some pity even while laughing--for these characters who long for strong family bonds are not, after all, too distant from the readers. (PRA)

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Mary D.
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The Search for Family: Comedy and Pathos in Anne Tyler's Later Novels

Anne Tyler's rare talent for combining comedy and pathos enables her to create characters whose pain is felt by the reader even as that same reader is led into laughter by the ludicrous situations in which Tyler places these characters. In her last three novels this ability to write comedy, indeed to structure farcical situations, without severely distancing her characters from the reader contributes significantly to both the critical and the popular success of her works. Although pathos almost precludes comedy in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, the design for comedy is built into particular scenes even in this novel. More striking are the comic effects in numerous scenes that move clearly into farce--a realistic kind of farce with fully developed characters --in Tyler's last two novels: The Accidental Tourist and Breathing Lessons. In all three novels the protagonists, who suffer varying degrees of isolation and loneliness, do not give up the search for family solidarity though for them the pain is not mitigated by laughter as it is for the reader--again, and again, and again.

With her humor, Tyler entertains the reader and does more: she endears her characters to us, makes them and their experiences memorable, and, perhaps makes them less pitiable than they would otherwise be so that it is easier to see them, eccentric though they may be, as having some behavior patterns similar to our own and those we know. With her sympathetic portrayal of characters Tyler ensures

that we laugh, not at the characters, but at their unexpected remarks and actions, which she has woven into dialogue and plot, and at the ludricrous situations in which she has enmeshed them. Amid the incogruities, the slapstick, the clever strategies in the action of these novels, Tyler tells a story of men and women whose suffering moves us so that we experience some pity and perhaps a little fear even as we laugh--for these characters who long for strong family bonds are not, after all, too distant from us.

In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant Ezra Tull simulates the meals of home for his customers and charges on a sliding scale so that the poor and elderly might afford such meals. Even his "gizzard soup" is "made with love" (121), though during his own childhood his mother returned from work at the grocery store short tempered, with tin cans to be opened for dinner. But the adult Ezra calls his fragmented family together for elaborate meals and tries to serve all the courses before the gathering breaks up in anger. In The Accidental Tourist Macon Leary writes travel guides that help reluctant travelers like himself to enjoy comforts of home whether traveling within the U. S. or abroad. At the same time, he must, for survival, abandon his empty house to look for a home--first with his brothers and sister, and then with Muriel and her son in a part of town which is, in many respects, foreign to him. While working to provide home-like atmospheres for others, both Ezra and Macon press on in the journey toward family solidarity, peace, and love despite failures, disappointments, and rejections in family life and marital love. Maggie Moran in Breathing Lessons persists in the work she chooses, giving personal nursing care

to the elderly who are separated from their families, even as she struggles to hold together her marriage and to reclaim her son and her extended family.

The search for family is, of course, not the only theme or motif present in the novels. Indeed the action in each work includes journeys that significantly affect the lives of the characters. More important, though, in considerations of tone is the fact that each of the three novels is permeated by a family's experience of death; yet Tyler sheds comic light on one situation after another, particularly in Breathing Lessons and The Accidental Tourist. And in both novels the need for family is emphasized--heightened, one might say--as pathos and comedy join forces and intensify critical moments in the lives of Macon and Maggie. Comic situations in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant are less frequent and less successful, as is appropriate, however, in a novel whose resolution is less positive or happy.

But Ezra himself never abandons the dream of a ritual meal of peace and love, not even when his financially successful, worldly-wise brother steals from him the country girl he loves. When, typically, an argument between his sister and his mother breaks up a family re-union at the Homesick Restaurant, Ezra says: "I wish just once we could eat a meal from start to finish" (111). Even as "a walking ache of man" (173), deserted by his lover, injured by his brother--Ezra survives by offering comfort to others in the form of tenderly prepared and beautifully served meals. Similarly, as a child, after one of his mother's rages, he would bring his sister "hot milk laced with honey, sprinkled over with cinnamon" (73). There is an abiding tone of pathos

in this novel despite comic moments and humorous comments (as when Ezra explains that tomatoes ripened on the window sill taste like the window sill). The most amusing scenes are those depicting Cody playing practical jokes on Ezra to get him into trouble: photographing the sleeping Ezra surrounded by empty liquor bottles, for example. Underlying Cody's playfulness, however, is his emotional suffering caused by his father's absence, his mother's quick temper, and his hostile jealousy of his brother. Cody's last trick, stealing Ruth, is totally lacking in humor, although Ezra, in the shock of hearing their news, asks in disbelief, "Is this some kind of joke?" (165).

But humor and pathos are not noticeably merged in this novel, as in Tyler's next two works; and the most vivid and memorable incidents in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant are the sad, violent ones, as when Pearl throws a spoon in Cody's face, slams a bowl of peas down on Ezra's head, and yanks Jenny by one of her braids off her chair. "Parasites," Pearl explodes, "I wish you'd all die, and let me go free. I wish I'd find you dead in your beds" (53). The misery of such experiences endures and is recapitulated when Jenny, as an adult, even as a pediatrician, treats her own children in similar fashion. Thus John Updike observes that the "genetic comedy in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant deepens into the tragedy of closeness, of familial limitations that work upon us like Greek fates and condemn us to lives of surrender and secret fury" (296).

In a stronger comic mode, though not without intense pathos, Tyler presents, in The Accidental Tourist, Macon Leary's struggle against loneliness and the unexpected jolts and losses in life, not

least of which was desertion by his mother in his childhood. But children are not treated abusively by parents in The Accidental Tourist. With this novel Tyler develops her artistic powers almost in a new direction. Her comic scenes, rather than alternating with sad ones, merge with them.

As the novel opens, Macon learns from Sarah, while they are driving back to Baltimore, that she wants a divorce. Having recently lost his son Ethan in a bizzare shooting, he soon loses Sarah as well. Inventive in the way he copes with her absence, he washes his clothes underfoot in the tub while he showers, and attaches the popcorn popper to a timer at his bedside for instant breakfast when he wakes. The reader who laughs aloud at Macon's convenient breakfast menu and his unique ways of eliminating bed-making and dishwashing sympathizes, at the same time, with his misery. Tyler creates in Macon a desperately lonely character whose life is described with saving humor. Macon's comic methods of homemaking remain in the forefront of the reader's mind. With his various systems for housekeeping, his system for feeding the dog, and his writing to meet deadlines, Macon manages to hold himself together for a while, though his clever devices and his household pets together defeat him in a farcical scene where he breaks his leg and thus must return to his ancestral home to be cared for by his sister and brothers. But he already knew he was "falling apart" (55) because he lost control on the phone while explaining to a grocery store clerk complex directions for delivering dog food to exactly the right spot. Amid his own suffering, he sees his dog's rapidly developing aggressive behavior and wonders if Edward could be

having a nervous breakdown.

Edward bites people, but Macon controls his emotions until he nearly goes to pieces in a New York hotel. His isolation is only emphasized when he suggests that the hotel he is evaluating should have some small animal around to help guests feel at home. This pivotal scene is but one example of Tyler's many tragi-comic situations in this work and in Breathing Lessons. Already depressed, Macon looks out at the city below and the "sky extending to infinity" and he panics: "All of a sudden, he thought he had died" (152). He fears not the height but the distance: "He had traveled to a point completely isolated from everyone else in the universe, and nothing was real but his own angular hand clenched around the sherry glass" (153). He drops the glass, runs out "lopsidedly," but sees "an endless corridor," and knows that he cannot "manage the trip." He gets to a phone booth and calls his brother:

> "Charles, I'm up on top of this building. . . . You've got to get me out!"
>
> "You out! What are you talking about? You've got to get me out!"
>
> "Pardon"
>
> "I'm shut in the pantry; your dog has me cornered."
>
> "Oh. Well, I'm sorry, but. . . Charles, it's like some kind of illness. I don't think I can manage the elevator and I doubt I could manage a stairway either and--"
>
> "Macon, do you hear that barking? That's Edward.

> Edward has me treed, I tell you, and you have to come home this instant.
>
> "But I'm in New York! I'm on top of this building and I can't get down!
>
> "Every time I open the door he comes roaring over and I slam the door and he attacks it, he must have clawed halfway through by now. . . . (155)

Though Macon is now desperate, Tyler turns the situation toward comedy. Throughout the story, her comic touches make her characters more appealing and perhaps less pitiable than they might otherwise be.

Because Charles threatens to call the police to shoot the dog, Macon calls Muriel, the "animal trainer," who saves the day for him as well as for his dog. Macon's call to Muriel signals his reversal and foreshadows his final turn to her, at the novel's close when the Taxi driver in Paris makes the U-turn just in time to pick her up on the way to the airport. Macon, who suffers from "geographic dyslexia" (111), now finds his way. Thus, even though he feels the jolts of potholes, spangles of sunlight on the windshield become, in his eyes, confetti. This image of celebration brings a joyful mood in closure, a mood that contrasts effectively with the rain on the windshield at the novel's opening.

Muriel has not only controlled and trained Edward but also has brought her confident love, her "fierce" determination (219), and her "fresh air and bustle and excitement" (227) into Macon's life. Moreover, she brings him a son, a family, her friends: "Singleton Street," a "foreign country" where he is "an entirely different

person" (202), but one who is at home even when the rattling window panes in Muriel's kitchen "remind[ed] him of train travel" (224). With Muriel, he does not feel so obligated to be mysterious and distant as he did with Sarah; and, interestingly, Sarah is the only major character who is not active in comic sequences, a situation which may help the reader to feel less pain for her when, in the end, she is rejected. In choosing Muriel, Macon moves out of the enclosure of a house with "empty air" (310). His care for Alexander begins to heal him so that he can bear the loss of Ethan and can picture Ethan "still part of that flow [of time]--in some other place, however unreachable" (342). Macon is more successful than Ezra in attaining love within the family unit; and, appropriately, in his story comedy converges with and contends successfully with pathos.

The travel metaphor that pervades Accidental Tourist becomes in Breathing Lessons a one-day journey to a funeral. Even so, the mood of this novel is the lightest yet from Anne Tyler. She renders the funeral service with sympathy and comedy at once, as Serena's innovative ceremony for Max recalls Maggie and Ira's unusual courtship thus eliciting more laughter from the reader while bringing to her characters the memories that strengthen their love for one another.

During the trip to and from the funeral Maggie's thoughts return periodically to the scene at Pimlico where her son's wife, Fiona, left Jesse for good. When Tyler finally dramatizes this scene it is a tour de force, farcical enough to top all that has gone before despite its deadly seriousness. One must laugh as Maggie puts all her money on a

horse called "Infinite Mercy" and asks Ira's father "Which ones did you vote for?" (262-63). Then, while Maggie spreds a picnic lunch, Dorrie is "dealing out" marshmallows on the bleachers in long rows that prevent others from sitting down. Junie, becomes faint, so she suddenly lies down, displacing marshmallows and holding her open parasol over her head. As Ira returns from placing a bet and hears Fiona shouting at Maggie and at Jesse so that the family has become a spectacle, he tries to set an example by sitting down, but sits in the marshmallows that he has not yet noticed.

This confusion is unabated for six pages, so despite Ira's harsh words against Jesse, and Fiona's anger, and Maggie's distress, and Ira's father's myopic view of his own welfare, the hilarity of the situation mitigates the pathos. Laughter is possible also because as this scene is presented the novel still provides the hope, through Maggie, that Jesse and Fiona may yet be reconciled. By embellishing the past and expecting too much of the future, and of those she loves, Maggie is protected until the end of the novel, as is the reader, from the harsh reality of Jesse and Fiona's permanent break. Then, at this point in time, Ira's tenderness with Maggie and her response to him provides the novel with its reasonably happy ending. "Muted" though that happiness may be, the ending here is more harmonious than that of Accidental Tourist where Macon's turn-around involves his painful rejection of his wife who will continue, he believes, in various stages of relationship with him "no matter what separate paths they [choose]. . . to travel" (340).

Because Maggie and Ira can handle their differences their love

endures. When Maggie's dreams of reuniting Jessie with his family are shattered, Ira comforts Maggie even while helping her to accept reality. He understands her desire to have a family, not simply a husband, at home. Her fear of aloneness is similar to Pearl's unhappiness over her "empty nest" (20) and Macon's sense of "empty air" when he is alone with Sarah (310).

For Maggie, and for Macon and Ezra, home and family are the priorities. In their very careers the protagonists of Tyler's last three novels try to create for others exactly what they want for themselves. In a world where marriages fly apart, they use their use their talents to give others the comforts of home; and the life choices of all three characters indicate that material things and financial success are not, for them, the important goals. As Tyler portrays each character's way of coping with losses and helping others cope in the search for family, she steadfastly avoids sentimentality. Depicting her characters' struggles and pain, she elicits for them our sympathy--often our empathy--even while she makes us laugh. In this technique her work is reminicient of Ford Madox Ford's, though in her last two works the comedy amid pathos is, certainly, more continuous, more persistent than in his.

Mary D. Zoghby

Kennesaw State College

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